



*Photographic portrait of Simó Gómez Polo, c. 1870*

## **The painter Simó Gómez Polo (Barcelona, 1845-1880)**

Simó Gómez Polo was the second son of a barcelonian merchants. He left soon his studies at the *Second Teaching Institute of Barcelona* to begin in the art of wood engraving. Thanks to his innate artistic skills, in 1857 he entered at the *School of Fine Arts of Barcelona (La Llotja)*, where he had as teachers Ramon Martí i Alsina, Lluís Rigalt and Joaquim Pi i Margall, amongst other personalities. On a particular level, he frequented the workshop of the painter Josep Serra Porson, and entered as an apprentice in the prestigious lithographic workshop of Eusebi Planas on 1858, where he acquired the basic knowings of drawing applied to lithography. With Planas, Gómez participated in the illustrated edition of *L'orfeneta de Menargues o Catalunya agonitzant* (1862) written by Antoni Bofarull.

Some of his drawings were engraved by his two brothers, Enric and Anton –highly reputed xylographers, especially Enric– and were published in magazines such as *La Publicidad*, *La Academia*, *Museo Universal* o *La Ilustración Española y Americana*. Otherwise, Gómez took part in 1859 in a castilian edition of Lavallée's *Histoire des Français depuis le temps des Gaulois jusqu'en 1830*, where he draw some portraits that were engraved by Llopis, who also later made some portraits, monuments and religious

subjects drawn too by Gómez for the magazines *La Revista de Catalunya* and *El Somatén* (1868).



*Portrait of Napoleon, in Historia de los franceses...  
(Madrid/Barcelona, 1859)*

In 1863, Gómez and his brother Enric went to Paris and enrolled in the *École impériale des beaux-arts*. There he became disciple of Thomas Couture and frequented, for a short time, the workshop of the occitan painter Alexandre Cabanel. In the French capital, he made lots of pencil copies of artworks from the *Museum of Louvre* and the *Museum of*

*Luxembourg*, the latter of which was a living artist museum, where he could see by the first-hand artworks of painters still active, such as Gustave Courbet, Henri Fantin-Latour or Jean-Louis-Ernest Meissonier. At the same *École impériale des beaux-arts*, Gómez won several competitions of copies of old masters, carving a certain fame of good draftsman. Of those times in Paris, is also known of him a lithographic portrait of Eugène Delacroix.



*Portrait of an unknown man, c. 1875 (MNAC)*

Gómez turned back to Barcelona in 1865 and resumed his studies in *La Llotja*, enrolling the course 1866-67 in Wood Engraving and the course 1868-69 in Colouring. In 1866 appeared in the *Academy of Fine Arts Exhibition* with the study *Old man reading* and *Saint Sebastián*, artwork next to the stream of Jose de Ribera, and his best artwork according to the art critic Eugeni d'Ors.

Around 1869 he traveled to Madrid, a city he had visited fleetingly in 1865, where he made several copies of masterpieces such as *The drunken man* of Velázquez, and worked on the decoration of a ceiling at the palace of the Marquis of Portugalete. The *Museum of Prado* was his school at the capital, where he studied the masterpieces of spanish and flemish painting, especially those of the spanish tenebrists of the XVIIth century, which will have a clear reflection in his painting.

In 1873 Gómez got married with Rosa Font and established his workshop in the Barcelona's neighborhood of Poble Sec. His workshop became

an habitual place of meeting of some artists, like his friend Apel·les Mestres -the many-sided artist-, and men of letters of the time like Jacint Verdaguer, Francesc Matheu, Peius Gener, Frederic Soler '*Pitarra*', or the pianist Carles Vidiella. Gomez had as a disciples well-known artists like Joan Brull, Josep Pascó, Josep Cusachs or Ferran Xumetra. From this workshop he made some great religious commissions, such as the four oils of saints for the church of Santa Maria del Pi (1875).



*Portrait of a young woman, 1875*

Gomez had a regular presence in the exhibitions of the *Society for Exhibitions of Fine Arts of Barcelona* in the years 1868, 1871, 1873 and 1874. In a more commercial level, he used to exhibit his oils in the shops of prints, frames and moldings at Escudillers street of Barcelona, where was concentrated the barcelonian artistic market. Is documented too his presence in january of 1876 in the *Jose Monter Establishment*, and in november of the same year in *Can Bassols*. Gómez was present too in *Sala J.B. Parés* between 1877 and the year of his death.

In 1874 he competed with Antoni Caba for the professorship of Colouring and Composition of *La Llotja*, with the pictorial representation of *Jude's repentance at the Sanhedrin* (*Royal Catalan Academy of Fine Arts of Sant Jordi* (RACBASJ)). Gómez didn't win, but his oil had staunch defenders, and obtained an honorific mention. Also was showed at the

*Exposition of the catalan prduction on science, letters and fine arts, agriculture and industry at the University of Barcelona (1877).* With his version of the biblical sketch, Simó Gómez introduced some elements of caravaggiesque realism, like one of the figures, that was a portrait of his father, and a drastic elimination of the scenery –that reduced to its recurrent neutral and dark background- in comparison with the work of Caba.



*Jude's repentance at the Sanhedrin (fragment), 1874 (RACBASJ)*

From 1876 to 1880 he became assistant professor of Colouring in *La Llotja*. At that time, 1877, Gómez refused to be camera painter of Alfonso XII, choosing not to give up his creative independence, with his paintings of genre with popular types, subjects with he won some reproaches to him of the art critic of the time, as well of the historiography up to middle XXth century, but that made him a painter of a certain fame. The crític of art Eugeni d'Ors dedicated extensive lines to Gómez in his unpublished work *Cincuenta años de pintura catalana* (started in 1923 but unpublished until 2002), probably something unusual –according to d'Ors aesthetic standards- if Gómez wasn't a relevant artist at that time. His popularity is also well known thanks to the biography that Feliu Elias dedicated to him.



*Man drinking, 1875*

In general, Gómez had an unfortunated historiographycal fortune around his work, especially from the middle of the XXth century and so on, but recently has been rehabilitated by the crític and art historiography, that have focused the interest in his pictorial skill beyond his fame as a popular artist and painter of anecdotal subjects of spanish tradition, and as a painter with some fame and income amongst some petit bourgeois circles of Barcelona.

Far away of being a simple copy-made painter, Gomez appears strongly with his art sometimes baroque costumist, sometimes naturalist. Someone called painter of sinthesis, revisionist, hybrid, user of styles, etc. All just adjectives to define his polyedric artistic personality. But he was'nt the only one: he lived between the old and the new painting in the catalan artístics scene, when the artists of the last quarter of XIXth century were searching for new artistic horitzons. As it's said, '*Gómez breaks the inertia of romanticism, but the 'imitation' kills his talent*'. According to d'Ors, Gómez was an '*indisciplined by temperamental behaviour*'.

Along with Ramon Martí i Alsina and Antoni Caba, Gómez was one of the most outstanding realists of catalan art, approaching with some of his artworks to the elegant and sober realism of Edouard Manet; it makes evident in the portrait of the furniture maker Francesc Vidal i Jevelli. Maybe he was far away from romanticism than painters like Caba, Mercadé o Martí i Alsina.





*Portrait of the cabinetmaker Francesc Vidal i Jevellí, 1875*  
(MNAC)

As it's said, Gomez felt more comfortable painting popular subjects, such as scenes of taverns, table games, musicians or soldiery, all inspired by contemporary everyday life, but expressed it in ways or stereotypes already fixed by the realist tendencies of the XVIIth and XVIIIth centuries. In this sense, he became the bearer of spontaneous realism, without boasting of virtuosity, turning round to the painting concept of Courbet transposing it with the spanish contemporary tavern iconography. Anyhow, a certain kind of archaeological neorealist too.

Many times his painting accuses the 'teaching' of the museum address; works such as *The dice players*, *The cards*, *Viva la Pepa!* or *I was a soldier too*, recreate the sixteenth-century interior compositions, but without entrenched archaeologies, adapting the iconography to the times and places he lived.

His artwork shows a moderate use of color, according to the minimum light conditions that applied to his compositions –just like Antoni Caba, he illuminated the figure very much and left the funds in darkness, eliminating the atmosphere-, approaching the intonation of XVIIth century, improving the unfortunate nickname of '*realistic flamenco*'.



*The guitarist, 1877* (MNAC)

The main pictorial production of Gómez is basically concentrated in little more than a decade, and is well represented at the *National Museum of Art of Catalunya* (MNAC), and at the RACBASJ, and is present too at the collection of the *Museum of Montserrat*. His death in 1880 by a sudden illness shocked the barcelonian scene of art, ending with an artist that probably has more to shown. On June of that same year, the art gallery *Sala Parés* dedicated an homage exposition to him.

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## SELECTED ARTWORKS OF GÓMEZ POLO:

**OIL PAINTINGS:** *A priest*, c. 1859; *Portrait of Enric Gómez Polo*, c. 1863; *Portrait of the poet Bartrina*, c. 1865; *Maredeu de la Salette*, c. 1865; *Man with a cloak*, 1866; *Saint Sebastian*, 1866; *Cap de noi*, c. 1866; *Portrait of the young cabinetmaker Mr. Vidal*, c. 1866; *First years of philosophy*, c. 1867; *Portrait of Mrs. Joaquina de Miguel*, 1867; *Political unrest*, 1869; *Portrait of the engraver J. Pérez*, c. 1870-1873; *I was a soldier too*, 1871; *The cards*, 1872; *Portrait of Josep Rosés Ricart*, 1872; *Portrait of Mercè Puig de Vidal*, 1873; *The dice players*, 1874; *Jude's repentance at the Sanhedrin/ Penediment de Judes*, 1874; *The Heir*, 1874; *Pensativa*, c. 1874; *The woman of the fan*, c. 1874; *Mariposilla*, c. 1874; *Portrait of the cabinetmaker Francesc Vidal i Jevellí*, 1875; *Man drinking*, 1875; *Portrait of a young lady*, 1875; *Saint Bonaventure*, 1875; *Saint Paul*, 1875; *Sant Llopart*, c. 1875; *Sant Llorens*, c. 1875; *Sant Climent*, c. 1875; *The drinker*, 1876; *The smoker*, 1876; *The doubt of Saint Thomas*, 1876; *Warrior's bust*, 1876; *Terzetto*, 1876; *Portrait of Mr. Matarrodona*, 1876; *Flemish soldier*, 1876; *Portrait of the goldsmith D. R. Matarrodona*, 1877; *Man with a cloak*, c. 1877; *Moises saved by the pharao's daughter*, 1877; *The guitarist*, 1877; *Carmen*, 1878; *Winter*, 1878; *At the easel*, 1879; *Poncelleta*, 1879; *¡Viva la Pepa!*, 1879; *The horn's boy*, c. 1879.

**ILLUSTRATION:** *Military portrait*, c. 1862; *Facade of the church of San Agustín, el Viejo, in Barcelona*, 1862; *Louis XVI of France*, c. 1870; *Portrait of unknown man*, c. 1875

**ENGRAVINGS:** *Portrait of Eugène Delacroix*, c. 1865.

**WATERCOLORS:** *Landscape of Caldes de Monbuí*, c. 1869; *Portrait of Cristofol Alandí*, c. 1879.

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